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WILLIAM P. MERRILL

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RELIGIOUS

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MEMBERS

by

MERRILL, D.D.

YMCA SOCIETY

NEW YORK CITY

1931

This sermon was delivered by Doctor Merrill at the service, held in memory of the late Louis Fitzgerald Benson, D.D., under the auspices of the Hymn Society in the Brick Presbyterian Church, New York city, on Sunday afternoon, January 18, 1931. His text was:

Colossians 3,16 (Moffatt translation):

“Teach and train one another with the music of psalms, with hymns, and songs of the spiritual life; praise God with thankful heart.”

The Religious Value of Hymns

This service is in loving and grateful memory of a good servant of God, who faithfully fulfilled the beautiful ideal of the text.

It is doubtful if many here, outside of the membership of the Hymn Society, know anything of Doctor Louis F. Benson. But most of us are richer for the work he did in the interests of beauty and dignity in worship, particularly in the use of hymns. During the last three or four decades there has come a vast improvement in the quality and value of the hymns and tunes used in the worship of the church. While new hymnals come from the press in bewildering numbers, there is slowly emerging a standard by which all may be judged. We find less of individual caprice, and more steady approval of the best, in the preparation of these aids to worship. In the development of this higher and better standard Doctor Benson had a large influence. He was really a pioneer in this work of providing better hymnals for our American churches.

It was my privilege to know him, and, in a very small way, to be associated with him, when he was preparing the Presbyterian *Hymnal*, which has been of large and continuing service to the churches. I know what pains he bestowed upon that work, and what eager and constant enthusiasm he felt for it. He was as keen in hunting hymns, their sources, history and uses, as any Englishman in hunting tigers, or as Livingstone in exploring Africa. And he was as careful as he was keen. Nor did he make the mistake, into which so many compilers fall, of issuing a hymnal technically sound, but over the heads, and beyond the practical uses, of ordinary congregations. He was mindful of that sound bit of exegesis, "The Lord said, 'Feed my lambs,' not 'Feed my giraffes.'" Yet he never tolerated the cheap or unworthy. The book he prepared was one of the first and best of the new order of standard and reliable Christian song-books.

He wrote hymns of beauty and worth. We are singing some of them at this service. He was too modest to make very much use of them in the hymnals he edited. But we may be sure that some of them will live in the growing affection of Christian people.

Our *Book of Common Worship* also has upon it the touch of Doctor Benson's fine taste and judgment. Some of its best parts are from his hand and mind and soul. Many of us ministers know more about hymns, and lead public worship more helpfully, because of the enlightenment and inspiration caught from the writings and the personal influence of this lover of the praise of God. It is very certain that music is to have an ever-increasing place in the worship and life of the Church of Christ. We are glad to honor in this simple way a leader in that cause, and to welcome to this service the fellowship of lovers of good songs known as the Hymn Society, which, in quiet but effective ways, is doing much to further the study and love of good hymns and tunes in the worship of the church.

But we are here for something more than to honor this good servant of the God of beauty and harmony, and to welcome his companions in the service of better praise. We are here for an object that blends readily with the thought of Doctor Benson and his life-work. For we are to give a thought to the value of hymns as a means of *keeping fit religiously*.

On the last two Sunday afternoons we have thought about the Bible and Prayer, as two of the indispensable means of keeping up a true and strong religious experience. It is not an easy matter just now to maintain a wholesome, strong, vigorous personal religion. We cannot afford to neglect any good means to that end. Here in sacred songs, in the knowledge and use of good and true hymns, we have a wonderful help to that end.

A good Scotch elder whom I knew and loved many years ago once came to me with a troubled heart and conscience. He told me he had a confession to make. It was this,—that he found more comfort in hymns than in the reading of the Bible: that it helped his soul more, comforted him more in sorrow, gave him greater strength to resist temptation, brought him more vividly the sense of communion with God, to read or repeat some great hymn, than to read his Bible. Was he wrong? Was it a sin? It was a joy to relieve that Scotch conscience of his with a clear and strong judgment that he was right in the matter. Some people, I remember saying to him, find a loveliness and appeal in the moonlight which they never find in the full blaze of the sun. "Fair is the sunshine,

fairer still the moonlight." Even if we look on the Bible as the unique Word of God, its beauty may be more wonderful and appealing to us when reflected from the souls and in the words of sensitive poets. I reminded him how practically every helpful hymn is based on thoughts or images from the Bible. Jacob's experience at Bethel takes hold of us more powerfully in "Nearer, my God, to Thee," than in the story of Genesis. Habakkuk is a sealed book to many who love to sing its message in the last stanza of Cowper's "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings." The "Sanctus" that Isaiah heard takes on a new glory when Gounod sets it to music, or when Heber gives it lyrical form in the hymn, "Holy, holy, holy." What is the hymnal but a poetic and musical commentary on the Bible?

There are many of us who are quite one with the Scotch elder in finding in the hymns something more appealing and more immediately helpful than much of what we find in the Bible itself. For one thing, the form helps greatly. It is a comfort and a joy to sing our thoughts of God. The lyric stays in the memory as the noblest prose cannot.

Amid all the changes that have come and are coming in the outward forms of religion, one wonders whether the use of hymns in private and personal religion is diminishing. Do the young people know the hymns as former generations did? Such evidence as I find makes me hopeful. Yet I am very sure that there might well be far larger use of the hymnal than now obtains.

In almost any church there would come a real and marked revival of spiritual life and of interest in worship, if every family connected with the church should secure a copy of the hymnal there used for home and personal uses; and if all who come there for worship should read and study and sing the hymns at home. Out of that familiarity would come a far more satisfactory offering of praise to God in the sanctuary.

And something more would come from it. For such private and family use of the hymnal would give to all in the home an inward treasure that would last through the years, and prove an invaluable help to the living of a faithful Christian life. Few things are better than to have a mind and heart stored with the best hymns. Out of such a treasure-house come unexpected aids in times of need.

There is much for which I give thanks as I remember the home of my childhood in New England. But one of the most vivid and loved memories is of the Sunday evenings when we would sit and sing as the daylight died away. We sang some strange hymns, crude, quite out of touch with modern taste and feeling. Yet the memory even of those is sweet. I never read or think of David's combat with Goliath, without recalling how my father loved the stirring song which began, "Strike the cymbal," and went on to describe how

"From the river,
Rejected quiver,
Judah's hero takes the stone;
Spread your banners,
Shout hosannas;
The battle is the Lord's alone."

Probably nowhere but in New England would "banners" be set to rhyme with "hosannas"; but there it did not seem incongruous. And I can recall the thrill that came as we sang of that conflict in which right won against might through the power of the Unseen God.

But, while some of the hymns we sang were thus uncouth and unworthy, and have rightly passed to oblivion, more of them were gems that are still of undiminished value. I can never come upon that beautiful prayer, "Father, whate'er of earthly bliss," without seeing our room with all the family gathered together and singing together. For that was one of the few hymns we sang every Sunday evening. I recall how the first gospel hymns caught us and excited us. I remember vividly the first time we came upon the hymn, "Holy, holy, holy," to Dykes's tune. I can still feel the thrill of joy its beauty roused. I remember the first time I ever heard "Now the day is over," to Barnby's setting. It seemed as if heaven itself could hold nothing more lovely.

I wonder how many homes are thus using sacred song as a simple and potent means of grace. Those that are not are missing a rare privilege and help. I was glad to hear, only a few days ago, from a friend who ministers to a church which broadcasts its services, that the bookseller in the town told him that he has sold 1800 copies of the hymnal in use in that church, for people to use in their homes in connection with the radio services. I am very sure, from facts known to me,

that young people still love to sing hymns; and any home will be the richer and purer for keeping up that simple practice.

But that is not all. The hymns are of great and effective value in one's private and personal life. I know, from statements made to me by men and women who have come to me for confession and counsel, how potent may be the influence for goodness, for purity, for godliness, of a hymn kept in mind, ready for instant use. One of the best men I have ever known told me once of the struggle he had had for many years with the surging up of unclean thoughts and images in his soul. They would rise without warning and overwhelm him. He said that the greatest help he found was to start singing, and keep singing over and over, the old hymn, "The Lord is my Shepherd; no want shall I know," to the tune of the folk song, "Forsaken." He said, "If ever I get to heaven, and am free from sin, I shall number that hymn among my eternal treasures." Another, who was troubled with sleepless hours, when worries of the day and thoughts of all kinds would surge through his mind and keep him awake and restless, said that he had found far more effective than counting sheep, or any other familiar device, the slow repetition over and over of the stanza,

"Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease.
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace."

I know that others would say with truth that, at times of stress and anxiety, no relief or help has meant quite so much as to get into the company of the great hymns, to play them over, to repeat them, to read them.

Friends, here is a real means of grace. You can do your inner life no better service than to know the hymns, and to use them right along with the Bible and prayer. Most of the hymns are prayers; and the rest are meditations, if they are true hymns. Great souls have voiced their deepest and highest emotions and thoughts in these hymns. A hymnal is a distillation of the precious essence of the souls of the saints.

It was in part because Doctor Benson realized the value of this use of the hymnal, in the religious experience of the individual and the home, that he stood so consistently and so

strongly for the printing of the hymnal rather than between the clefs of the hymnal to be a treasury of devotion. The hymnal should be not merely an aid but also a help to private devotion and

If you are not making full use of it, I commend the practice to you and warn you of neglect. There are hymns of such power that they get into your soul and are ready to lift you over hard places, carry you up, give wings to your praying, bring you out of sorrow, and open the doors of your heart for God to come in and dwell there. Unless you are a Christian in your spiritual sense, the hymnal is naturally pure and good, unselfish, and it will help you can find to live the life you desire to live. Here at your hand is a power that the souls of the saints lay hold on and keep you climbing. Thank God for it and have its full power and do its full



of the hymns apart from the music, clefs of the tune. He wanted the of devotion. He was right. The merely an aid to public worship, but motion and life.

full use of the hymns to that end, to you as one you cannot afford to of such power and grace that, once and are really known there, they will carry you safely past temptations, g, bring comfort and joy in hours of ors of your heart that Christ may Unless you are far above the average al sensitiveness and attainments, unselfish and godly, you need all the the life you know God wants you to d is a precious aid, through which hold on your soul to help you climb Thank God for such a gift! Let it o its full work in your soul.